

STATE HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY OF IOWA

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

# The Annals of Iowa

---

Volume 68 | Number 2 (Spring 2009)

pps. 180-182

---

## Memory and Myth: The Civil War in Fiction and Film from Uncle Tom's Cabin to Cold Mountain

Samuel Graber  
*Valparaiso University*

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2009 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

---

### Recommended Citation

Grabner, Samuel. "Memory and Myth: The Civil War in Fiction and Film from Uncle Tom's Cabin to Cold Mountain." *The Annals of Iowa* 68 (2009), 180-182.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1327>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Benjamin Prentiss as hero of the Hornets Nest all were proliferated by Reed and his contemporaries.

Timothy Smith should be lauded for bringing about the republication of this history. His introduction provides an enlightening account of noted Iowan David W. Reed, his involvement with the battle, and his invaluable direction in the battlefield's preservation, commemoration, and long-term interpretation. Smith's inclusion (PDF files on CD-ROM) of the four large maps that accompanied the original publication is of great benefit.

For the Shiloh researcher looking for an account of the battle from the earliest of testimonials and from the veteran perspective, *The Battle of Shiloh and Organizations Engaged* should be a staple of reference.

*Memory and Myth: The Civil War in Fiction and Film from Uncle Tom's Cabin to Cold Mountain*, edited by David B. Sachsman, S. Kittrell Rushing, and Roy Morris Jr. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2007. xiii, 307 pp. Notes, index. \$62.95 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

Reviewer Samuel Graber is Lilly Fellow and lecturer in the humanities at Valparaiso University. His dissertation (University of Iowa, 2008) is "Twice-Divided Nation: The Civil War and National Memory in the Transatlantic World."

Every April throngs of Iowans explore the Civil War era at the festivities surrounding Keokuk's Battle of Pea Ridge Reenactment, where audiences listen to speeches by impersonators, watch "living historians" demonstrate the intricacies of Civil War medicine, and enjoy a dramatic reenactment staged on land no real Civil War battle ever touched. The popularity of such events testifies to the intensity and variety of Civil War memory. In a state with no major battle site, it seems one can still be invented.

Iowa readers will find similarly intriguing reenactments of the war in *Memory and Myth*, a wide-ranging collection of 25 short essays culled from more than a decade's worth of conference papers. The pieces are organized into sections on antebellum writers and slavery, the war years and their aftermath, modern writers' responses to the war, and cinematic and televised representations. The essays locate myths and memories of the war within histories, novels, newspapers, autobiographies, and film. Although somewhat uneven in quality, they display an intellectual flexibility befitting a diverse authorship that includes media scholars, English professors, historians, and even poets.

In its scope and loose organization, *Memory and Myth* reflects the complexity that makes Civil War memory both beguiling and frustrating. The war seems to be remembered everywhere in American

culture — from F. Scott Fitzgerald's fiction to PBS's pledge drives — but systematic explanations of why the war has been remembered in such peculiar ways are difficult to provide through the medium of a short essay. Not surprisingly, *Memory and Myth's* selections tend to be descriptive, their arguments sketched rather than fully developed. The sampling nevertheless conveys a sense of the rich historical ground beneath mnemonic landmarks such as *Gone with the Wind*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Birth of a Nation*, and *Roots*. Such towering works have come to stand for the war era in the popular imagination, but this collection highlights their connections to a surprisingly wide range of lesser-known texts and contexts. In the literary realm, the essays recover a vibrant antislavery publishing market behind the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, reexamine overlooked Civil War writers William Gilmore Simms and Ben Wood, and revisit neglected novels such as Henry Adams's *Democracy* and Upton Sinclair's *Manassas*. Roy Morris Jr. offers incisive readings of Ambrose Bierce and Stephen Crane. The final section on films and especially television productions provides some of the collection's liveliest pieces, and should appeal to Iowans who recall the televised versions of *Gone with the Wind*, *Roots*, or Ken Burns's PBS documentary, *The Civil War*, as formative cultural events.

Indeed, the collection's primary value lies in its capacity to defamiliarize such familiar portraits of the Civil War era in interesting ways. The war's cultural representation, these scholars suggest, was more complicated than we suppose and arose from unacknowledged sources. The Uncle Tom, Scarlett O'Hara, and Kunta Kinte we think we remember turn out to be far more complicated characters in their original settings. Under careful scrutiny such figures bear witness, not just to slavery and war, but to the complex and largely forgotten cultural forces at work in their own creation, popular reception, and mythic appropriation.

Less apparent from this collection is why such historical complexity so quickly gives way to the more simplistic explanations and interpretations that American popular culture favors. Encountering so many excavated facts and fictions, readers likely will wonder why these events and stories were buried, why others were preserved, and why still others were radically transformed to make them palatable and relevant to contemporary audiences. Many of *Memory and Myth's* essays seem willing to bypass such challenging questions, to take them up in passing, or to gloss them in a final paragraph. The most impressive essays, however, manage to address issues of collective memory construction and myth-making in the few pages allotted. William Huntzicker's concise and revealing exploration of the dubious factuality of

Alex Haley's *Roots*, and the combined efforts of Robert Blakeslee Gilpin, Edward J. Blum, and Sarah Hardin Blum to dissect Robert Penn Warren's interrogation of the John Brown myth all succeed admirably in this regard.

Perhaps Iowa's fading historical connection to John Brown or other war-era notables will make such discussions more relevant to those interested in Iowa history. More likely, Iowa's broader participation in the national obsession with the Civil War—on display every summer in Keokuk's reenactment of a battle the state never actually staged—ensure that *Myth and Memory* will find as many interested readers in Iowa as it will elsewhere.

*Eber: Pioneer in Iowa, 1854–1875*, by Ronald H. Stone. Iowa City: Press of the Camp Pope Bookshop, 2008. xii, 235 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, index. \$25.00 paper.

Reviewer Douglas Firth Anderson is professor of history at Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa. His research, writing, and teaching focus on the history of the American West.

Eber Stone (d. 1875) was a pioneer settler of Humboldt County. A native of western New York, he brought with him experience as a teacher and school superintendent as well as commitments to "scientific" agriculture, temperance, antislavery, and nondenominational Protestantism. Between his arrival in 1854 and his death 21 years later from typhoid, he led in the development of Humboldt's public school system and its agricultural society. Stone made annual reports to the Iowa Agricultural Society beginning in 1864, and he also wrote essays on education and Humboldt County. His publications, together with his local office holding (secretary of the Humboldt County Agricultural Society, chair of the Board of County Supervisors, county superintendent of schools), provide ample evidence of his role as an articulate spokesperson for Humboldt's "free government" (Republican), agricultural potential, and aspirations for "culture and refinement" (198).

Ronald H. Stone — a great-grandson of Eber — has sought to construct a book that goes beyond a genealogy of interest only to family members and a local history that provides documents and data uncritically and with little historical context. Yet, what the great-grandson said of his forebear ironically also applies to him: "His reach exceeded his grasp" (182). Compared to, say, Judy Nolte Lensink's study of Emily Hawley Gillespie in "*A Secret to Be Buried*" or Thomas J. Morain's study of Jefferson, Iowa, in *Prairie Grass Roots*, Ronald Stone's